DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 279 CS 210 726

AUTHOR McClure, Amy A.
TITLE Children's Responses to Poetry in a Supportive Literary Context.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (76th, San Antonio, TX, November 21-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Creative Writing; Intermediate Grades; Peer Evaluation; Peer Influence; *Poetry; *Reader Response; *Reading Writing Relationship; Rural Education; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Peer Modeling; Writing Models

ABSTRACT

In an effort to understand the effect of a nurturing, supportive environment on children's understanding of poetry, a study was conducted involving the observation of 42 rural fifth and sixth grade students and their two teachers over a school year. During the course of the year the children were invited to respond to published, professional poetry in large and small group settings, as well as work on poetry of their own, regularly submitting it for criticism by teachers and peers. The children were audiotaped interacting with one another and with their teachers during these sessions, and were occasionally interviewed and photographed. The results of the study suggest that a significant number of the children were able to develop more complex, abstract responses to professional poetry and create poetry of their own with deeper, more complex metaphor and imagery when allowed a long enough period of time to discuss and experiment with it. Suggestions for teaching children poetry include the notions that (1) children need to be immersed in reading and writing poetry, rather than studying it in a short unit; (2) children should not be pushed to develop technical perfection in their work, but rather allowed to search for meaning in a poem, using their own past experiences; and (3) children's initial, disorganized efforts at poetry should be encouraged and nurtured by peers and teachers. (JC)

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CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO POETRY IN A SUPPORTIVE LITERARY CONTEXT

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Amy A. McClure
Assistant Professor
Department of Education
Ohio Wesleyan University
Delaware, Ohio 43015
614-369-4431

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Responses to Poetry

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Literary response theory particularly in relation to poetry has traditionally focused on text or writer with the influence of the reader's past experiences and understandings virtually ignored. From this perspective it was assumed that readers must possess tacit knowledge of literary conventions and forms before they could uncover the inherent "true" meaning of a literary work. As a result, research on response to poetry has long been defined as measuring student ability or inability to discern the "correct" meaning of text (Richards, 1929; Purves and Beach, 1972).

However, theorists began affirming the difficulty of examining discrete elements of a poem without first responding to it as an aesthetic whole. The relationships between verse form, rhyme scheme, sentence structure and imagery were increasingly perceived as too interrelated to have a separate, clearly distinguishable effect (Rosenblatt, 1978). Additionally, it was thought that the emotional nature of poetry precluded distilling its essence into a utilitarian prose statement.

This new understanding of the nature of poetry as well as a growing awareness of the reader's role in the reading/response process has led to a reconceptualization of the concept of "response" in poetry. Rather than focusing on a poem's discrete parts to answer the question "What does it mean?", the modified paradigm is one in which readers experience the poem as a whole with meaning an inextricable part of that whole and one's personal constructs a critical factor in shaping meaning.

As a result response has increasingly been defined as a transaction requiring reciprocal interaction between reader and text. It is tempered by the reader's experiences, conceptions and perceptions which direct him/her to distill the multiple meanings implicit in the text, synthesizing these into an organized whole. Because it is tempered by the individual, response

is individual in nature, reflecting one's unique view of the world (Rosenblatt, 1978). The function of text in this process is to both guide and constrain the reader's construction of meaning.

However, one's own perspective cannot be considered apart from the context in which it exists. Various elements of social context are critical in helping readers construct responses as well as enlarge, deepen and practice them (Rosen and Rosen, 1973; Barnes, 1976; Hickman, 1979; Hepler, 1982). It is through interaction with both peers and teachers, mutually negotiating meanings through language, that children develop the abilities to reflect upon their unique personal constructs or "responses."

As a result of these new understandings about the experiential and social nature of response, research has been extended to include a wider range of evidence gathered from continuous study in natural settings. Questions such as "what are the relationships between peer constructed social context and response?", "what experiences do children use to help them make sense of poetry?" and "how do responses develop over time?" have become important.

Children's interests and preferences for particular genres as well as specific works within genres have also been defined as response. This perspective has been particularly prevalent in the genre of poetry with many studies focusing on children's poetry preferences. These studies reveal striking similarities when viewed across age, sex, demographic data and time (Mackintosh, 1924, 1932; Avegno, 1956; Terry, 1974; Ingrahm, 1980; Simmons, 1980; Fisher and Natarella, 1982). Generally, children tend to prefer poetry which includes humor, nonsense, familiar experiences, imaginative story lines, animals, holidays and people. They dislike poems perceived as didactic, meditative, serious, or "difficult to understand."

Narrative and limerick forms are enjoyed while more abstract forms such as haiku and free verse are generally disliked. Favorite poetic elements include rhyme, rhythm, sound and repetition. Figurative language is not particularly enjoyed.

These studies provide valuable insights into children's emerging understandings of poetry. However, because they often sampled one set of responses over a limited time or an instance of response after some intervention had occurred, it may well be that only the lower limit of children's responses have previously been measured. Those who work with young children know that their responses are often elusive and spontaneous, frequently articulated in a half-formed, disorganized fashion. As a result it is difficult to document their understandings in experimental settings.

Thus, it was hypothesized that conducting research in an environment which offered many continuous opportunities for response to poetry would provide rich insights, demonstrating that children may be capable of developing quite complex understandings of poetry when their efforts are continually supported over time. The intention was to move beyond quantifying an occurrence of response to constructing an understanding of the conditions which nurture more complex cognitive and affective understandings of literature. The approach seemed a necessary extension of past research.

Purpose of the Study

The study extended previous research on children's responses to poetry by continuously examining these responses in an environment which nurtured and supported them. Further, the study was designed to provide additional insights into the teaching practices which seemed to support the

development of more complex responses. Thus, focus was first on analysis of the context created by both teachers and children. Then the responses children made within this context were analyzed. The resulting descriptions led to hypotheses concerning the nature of children's responses to poetry as well as the influence of classroom context on this response.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was observational, employing an ethnographic, participant-observer perspective. Since the focus was on a wide range of behaviors which change over time as well as the influence of context on these behaviors, the ethnographic approach seemed more suitable than an experimental design. Additionally, the desirability of examining poetry as a total entity seemed to dictate an approach more qualitative than quantitative in nature.

Subjects

The population of the study included forty-two rural fifth and sixth graders. Two teachers worked with the children. Ostensibly, each was assigned to one grade level. However, distinctions between teachers seemed more dependent on areas of expertise than on arbitrary grade-level assignments.

The site was chosen purposefully because of its appropriate match with the study's objectives. Poetry was valued and nurtured by these teachers who knew appropriate ways to help children generate complex responses. The classroom's informal structure also provided an appropriate environment for generating observable events which could contribute to the researcher's understandings of children's responses to poetry.

Research Cycle

Data was collected during three interactive -- reactive phases, reflecting the study's ethnographic perspective. During the first phase (August to October), entry and collection of contextual data was the major focus. Tentative research questions were identified to provide a general framework for what to observe. Interviews with teachers and children were conducted in conjunction with direct classroom observations. These were supplemented by the observer's comments which were designed to make tentative links between observations and theoretical constructs. Audiotaping was also introduced to ensure accurate recording of contextual data, particularly the occurrence of teacher-student interactions. A preference survey was given to discern the kind of poetry these children enjoyed at the beginning of the year.

This general observation phase led to the selection of various elements of response and context which seemed to merit closer scrutiny or were puzzling to the researcher. Phase two (late October to February) was thus characterized by purposeful, focused observation of specific phenomena. Audiotaping of typical child/child and teacher/ child interactions continued. Interviewing of both teachers and students, using open-ended questions dictated by the particular event under scrutiny, was conducted. Still pictures were taken of various artistic responses. Videotaping was also introduced so as to capture subtle nuances of particular classroom occurrences. These activities were all guided by the initial research questions which were refined and modified as new understandings emerged.

The final phase (March-May) focused on verification of data through additional observations and interviews. Primary emphasis was on ensuring

that enough data was available to confirm or disconfirm trends which had arisen from the primary analysis. Near the conclusion of this phase, emphasis shifted to examining the developmental changes occurring over the course of the year. The major components of this cycle are shown in Figure 1.

Sampling procedures were also implemented to ensure representativeness of data in terms of time, events, participants and processes. Once the particular contextual and response items to be sampled were identified, sampling inventories were constructed. These guided the subsequent systematic collection of data. When further analysis suggested a need for modifications in sampling, new items were added while others were deleted from the inventories. Additionally, the issue of trustworthiness, with particular attention to prolonged site engagement, triangulation, member checks and peer debriefing was addressed to ensure credibility.

Procedures for Data Analysis

The analytic-inductive method of data analysis was used to test tentative hypotheses against new data, then increasingly refine these hypotheses to create a cogent description of poetic response and the context which nurtured it. In late December, all data was reviewed and tentative pattern codes were assigned. These codes were triangulated through both teachers and children, then coordinated with various units of data.

Subsequent analysis (January through March) then focused on verifying, refining and modifying these identified themes and patterns. Generally, analysis confirmed what had been hypothesized from the early data. Rather than observing many new patterns of response, it was more common to observe

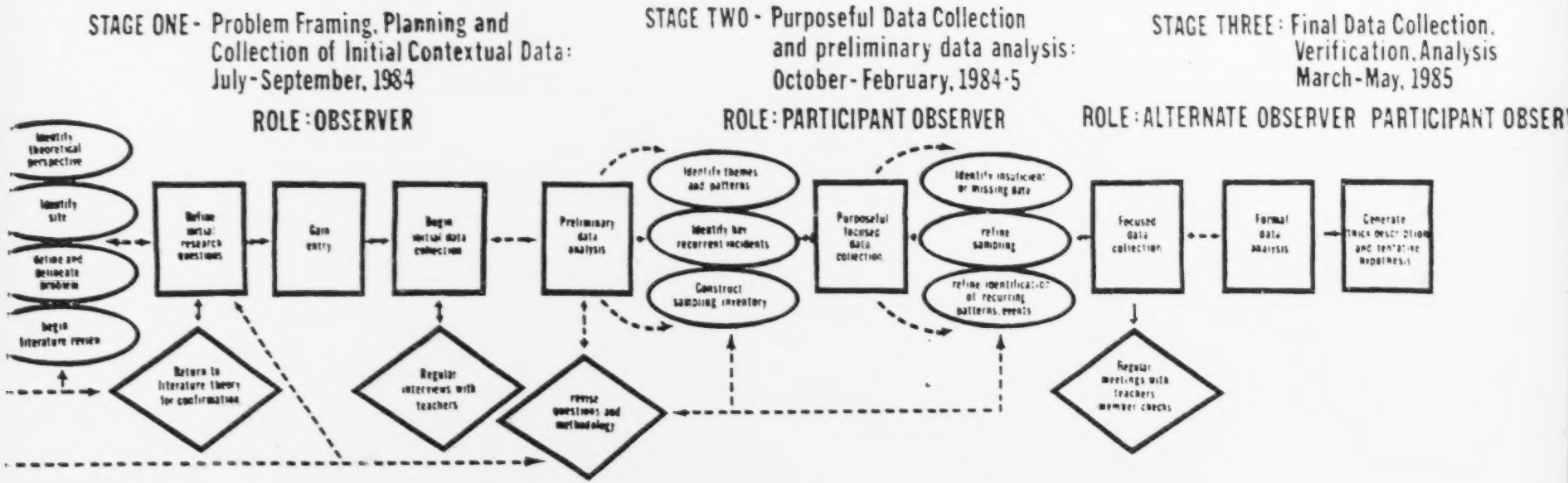
STAGE ONE - Problem Framing, Planning and Collection of Initial Contextual Data: July - September, 1984
ROLE: OBSERVER
STAGE TWO - Purposeful Data Collection and preliminary data analysis: October - February, 1984-5
ROLE: PARTICIPANT OBSERVER
STAGE THREE: Final Data Collection, Verification, Analysis March - May, 1985
ROLE: ALTERNATE OBSERVER PARTICIPANT OBSERV
Identify theoretical perspective
Identify site
Define and delineate problem
Begin literature review
Refine initial research questions
Gain entry
Begin initial data collection
Preliminary data analysis
Identify themes and patterns
Identify key recurrent incidents
Construct sampling inventory
Purposeful focused data collection
Identify insufficient or missing data
refine sampling
refine identification of recurring patterns, events
Focused data collection
Formal data analysis
Generate thick description and tentative hypothesis
Return to literature theory for confirmation
Regular interviews with teachers
revise questions and methodology
Regular meetings with teachers member checks

FIGURE 1 Inquiry Cycle

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additional children participating in ways that had previously been identified. New patterns and themes which did emerge at this point were commonly the result of children deepening their understandings of poetry or experimenting with more complex aspects of previously identified responses. However, the identified patterns were never viewed as inviolate. Rather, the researcher strove to remain skeptical so as to preserve the validity of her conceptualizations.

In late March the data was again reviewed and coding refined to facilitate analysis of the contextual factors. Analytic summaries, which served to link the data conceptually or demonstrated how specific data related to the general themes, were written then filed with the related materials. This process was repeated in June with the response data.

FINDINGS

The findings are described in three sections. The first details the general classroom events which provided opportunities for response. The second describes the teachers' philosophical convictions which, in turn, shaped the physical and emotional context which undergirded response events. The third section describes children's responses to poetry, focusing particularly on the social network they created and their emerging understandings of various poetic elements.

Classroom Events in Poetry

Throughout the year, these teachers orchestrated the classroom context so that many events relating to published poetry as well as poetry written by the children occurred. These events comprised the "poetry curriculum," as what transpired with poetry did occur within the broad parameters of

these events. This curriculum was composed of three interrelated parts. In the first, children participated in activities designed to build their familiarity with the work of professional poets. Thus, through large group sharing sessions with teachers as well as small group and partner sessions with peers, children developed constructs about the characteristics of good poetry by reading fine examples to each other.

The second component complemented the first. As children acquired experience with poetry, they experimented with their tentatively constructed understandings of poetic elements by trying them out in their own daily poetry writing. As they wrote, they were encouraged to go beyond the obvious, to "play with ideas" in order to revise their pieces. Critiquing sessions with both teachers and peers helped them improve their initial efforts.

The third component, that of artistic extensions, complemented as well as extended the insights acquired through the first two. In this phase children were encouraged to extend their poetic understandings through art. The close attention to meaning and content which is required to illustrate a poem often forced them to think more deeply or even reconceptualize their original thought.

Within these broad activities, the teachers functioned in the manner described by Rosenblatt (1978), then refined later by Rosen and Rosen (1973) and Hepler (1982). They endeavored to help children examine meanings in their own lives, then supported them in the process of linking a poem with these individually constructed understandings. Emphasis was always initially on enjoyment. Eventually enjoyment was deepened through closer scrutiny of a poem's meanings, composition or purpose.

The Context for Response

The Classroom Teachers.

Both teachers held certain philosophical convictions about teaching and learning which supported their subsequent organization of the environment. These espoused convictions concerning the teacher's role could be summarized as that of teacher as "facilitator of a developmental process" rather than "agent of remediation" or "transmitter of knowledge." Similarly, these teachers advocated a perspective on language which was compatible with this view of the teacher's role. They believed that children learn best when encouraged to interact with peers and adults as they negotiate meanings through language.

The teachers held equally strong opinions as to poetry's central role in life and the school curriculum. They believed poetry cannot only help children become more sensitive, observant and thoughtful, but also better writers. Poetry was also perceived as a useful tool for studying various content-area topics. The following examples, written respectively for units on milkweed and time, reflect the teachers' emphasis on helping children link curricular experiences with poetry.

Past and Future

Flying in the wind
A milkweed passes by.
The milkweed like a
    fluttering flying bird
Meets a cloud in the sky.

Mandy
Grade 5

People change with time
Like days grow into weeks
The past is grandfather to
    the future
But I am now.

Johnny
Grade 6

Classroom Climate.

The emphasis on a non-directive teaching role and an active, exploratory, self-directed role for the learner, contributed to the creation of a

classroom climate which could be characterized as supportive of children's tentative, exploratory responses. Several aspects of the environment seemed particularly conducive to fostering this climate. Each will be analyzed as to its contribution to an atmosphere which served to support the children as they made tentative, then increasingly more confident responses to poetry.

Sanctioning of Peer Interaction. These teachers perceived peer interaction as a valuable and integral part of life in their classroom. They firmly believed that collaborative learning, in which children explored and negotiated their tentative understandings through language, was an essential part of the response process. Thus, they would often directly suggest that talk be an integral part of children's interactions around poetry. For example, children were often invited to attend a group critiquing session or urged to work with specific children.

Support for Experimentation. The teachers tolerated and supported experimentation and divergent thinking. However, flexibility had its limits, particularly with published poetry. Both teachers recognized the parameters of meaning inherent in particular poems and continually communicated this to the children. Thus, although they encouraged children to explore various potential meanings, they did not encourage interpretations which were clearly unsupported by text.

Teachers Are People Too. Both teachers regularly espoused a personal conviction that adults are fallible, subject to the same frustrations in writing and understanding poetry that children experience. Often they would pull out their own poetry journals, showing the children how various poems evolved as well as the struggles they experienced during the writing process. This attitude seemed to help the children become more relaxed,

willing to take risks with poetry. Because no model of perfection existed against which their own tentative attempts would inevitably be measured, the children felt free to follow their own voices.

Supporting the Struggle. Similarly, the teachers also acknowledged the difficulties inherent in writing and understanding poetry. Thus, when one child complained that her poem wouldn't "come out right," a teacher responded.

> Do you know that's a plague of every poet? Or every writer? Everyone who tries to write poetry that plagues them...trying to get down what is in your head. Because oftentimes it's an image or a picture, an idea. Then when you try to write that down...you can't find the words to say what you are feeling or thinking. Don't get discouraged because I tell you when you first start to write sometimes it is very difficult...but it will come -- don't despair.

This recognition seemed to reassure children that it was permissible to feel frustrated and anxious about their work.

Offering Praise and Feedback. The teachers offered praise and criticism in an honest, focused manner. Comments were directed specifically to what the child had done and also included suggestions for what might be changed. Thus, a teacher would say, "When you revised, you lost the best part of your original poem...the part that was unusual. Go back to your original and work with that idea," or "You need to expand the last line -- think about how the leaves crackle and crunch when you land." Although the teachers' comments were quite direct, their attitude seemed to be more supportive than intrusive; confirming rather than critical.

Freedom within Limits: Establishing Expectations. The teachers articulated clear, explicit expectations for both appropriate behavior and task completion. Using direct statements, peer modeling and consistent

monitoring of student activities, they created certain parameters within which children could exercise much choice.

Understandings about Poetry.

The teachers sought to build understandings about how specific elements contribute to the overall meaning or poetic image. These understandings were built through interactions occurring with both professional poetry and that written by the children. However, no clear causal or sequential relationships could be discerned. Rather the relationship was transactional; children seemed to draw simultaneously from all sources in order to develop their constructs of poetry. Similarly, the teachers used all available opportunities to communicate these ideas. Several recurring themes which seemed to guide these interactions emerged from the data:

Sense-making. The teachers communicated the attitude that poetry must make sense; that there is a logical connection between the real world and the world created by the poem. Not only was a viable meaning available to readers but several meanings could be generated in relation to one poem.

Clarifying Meaning. The teachers asked questions which helped children clarify, refine and extend meanings so they went beyond surface sense-making to a more complex awareness of how sense is conveyed in poetry.

Poetry Reflects Reality. Teachers continually developed children's awareness of the notion that poetry must reflect the true essence of an event or object. Thus, they first developed an awareness of how professional poets do this, then helped children make their own poems "true-to-life".

Selecting the Precise Word. The teachers frequently developed children's awareness that each word in a poem must express just the right shade of meaning for the context. This was initially conveyed through comments on the ability of professional poets to select the perfect word. Children were then encouraged to experiment with this element in their own writing.

Look and Sound of Poetry. The teachers endeavored to show children how poets pay particular attention to the way the words sound together as well as the particular form the words take on the page. Children were introduced to elements of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, line pattern and shape through their use by professional poets. They were then encouraged to make their own pieces "look" and "sound" poetic by paring away unnecessary words.

Poetry Is Unique. Teachers continually helped children appreciate how poets go beyond the obvious and try to make their poetry unique. As the children gained experience with writing poetry, they were encouraged to "say something new or something old in a new way" in their own work.

Show, Don't Tell. The teachers continually showed the children how professional poets evoke a mood without directly telling the reader their intended purpose. Then, through comments and careful probing, they helped children experiment with this concept in their own writing.

Awareness of Form. The teachers built awareness of poetic form through exposure to many types of poetry. With the exception of haiku, discussion of form was secondary to discussion of meaning. Eventually children experimented with creating poetry which exemplified a particular form.

Awareness of Figurative Language.

In order to provide more specific evidence as to how teachers built

these understandings, their work with the element of figurative language will be described in some detail. Through the reading of professional poetry and critiquing of the children's own work, these teachers sought to extend the children's understandings of various aspects of figurative language including simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, and personification. In this way they helped children construct a critical framework for discussing figurative language as well as heightened their appreciation for the complexity of its use. This did not mean that children were expected to formally identify such constructions. Rather, the terms were used naturally in conjunction with many examples and as part of a general discussion about the poem. The emphasis was always first on enjoyment, then on deepening enjoyment through close examination of how a poet orchestrates this element to create a coherent image.

Similes and metaphors were most often the focus of these discussions. Usually the emphasis was on helping the children become aware of what was being compared, then realizing how this comparison helped them view the phenomena differently. The following discussion, held by the sixth grade teacher in conjunction with a reading of Merriam's "Summer Night," illustrates how this occurred.

> Teacher: What's it mean -- "the night is a dark blue hammock sitting between the white pillars of day?"
>
> Johnny: I think the poet is in a hammock and he's writing about the night.
>
> Brandon: Yea...it's talking about how this poet is in a hammock at night.
>
> Teacher: What do you think? Anybody got a different idea?
>
> Becky: I think it's talking about day against night.

Teacher: What do you mean?

Stacie: It's between the end of one day and the beginning of another. You know...one day is one white pillar and the next day is the other pillar. The hammock is like the night. You know...it's dark.

Teacher: Why do you think the poet called it a dark-blue hammock?

Deon: Because dark blue is like the night's color and white is for day.

Teacher: That's a really different way to show it, isn't it? Would you have thought to show it like that? That's really different.

Once the children began developing an awareness of figurative language, they began experimenting with its use in their own poetry. The teachers supported these tentative efforts, assisting the children with extending and "staying with" their metaphors through the entire poem. For example, when Johnny was struggling with "Autumn Masterpiece," in which he compared the picture of a fall day with an artist creating a beautiful painting, the teacher helped him select the appropriate words and title to refine the metaphor. Or when Angela was creating "Breakfast," which used the metaphor of the sun as a devouring entity gobbling up night, the teacher helped her discover phrases which deepened this image. Thus, in this classroom the teachers helped children develop an understanding of figurative language by providing many experiences with professional poetry. These understandings were further refined as they helped the children apply these ideas to their own pieces.

Children's Responses to Poetry

Various facets of children's responses to poetry were examined, beginning with the ways children supported each other in constructing and

refining their understandings. Next, emerging understandings of various poetic elements were documented to describe how the children gradually acquired formal awareness of literary constructs. Although each element will be described separately to facilitate clarity, the factors actually formed an interrelated network which was supported and inextricably bound to context.

Social Context.

In this classroom children built a strong social network among themselves within which they supported each other's tentative responses to poetry. The following variables were identified as the significant aspects of this peer-constructed social context:

Peer Reading/Writing Communities. Children regularly selected friends to whom they read poetry and submitted their own poems for critiquing. Because they worked closely on a continuing basis, a sense of rapport and trust was built among group members. Further, it seems that these shared activities created a group history which, in turn, supported subsequent activities. Thus, if a poem critiqued in the past was mentioned, group members understood the reference and perceived its relationship to the poem currently under group scrutiny. It seems these communities provided the opportunity to "try out" one's ideas in a supportive setting. This, in turn, nurtured the development of more complex, thoughtful responses than might be generated alone.

Support for Those Less Able. Often able children provided assistance in the form of extensive scaffolding to children who were experiencing difficulty with response. They provided a model of appropriate response as well as guided the less able child's initial efforts so they conformed to

expectations. The following comment by one child illustrates how useful this assistance was:

> Last year I used to write just three line poems, you know. But this year I started writing poetry with meaning. Just coming to groups and getting to talk with friends...watching other people write poetry...talking with the guys in the morning... Well, we'd get some crazy ideas and some good ideas about poetry and someone might pick up on different subjects and we'd make a poem.

Provide Ideas. Peers frequently served as a source of ideas for both reading and writing poetry. For example, during poetry sharing sessions, children would suggest ideas to each other on what to read and for the activities that transpired during these sessions. Peer suggestion was even more influential during the process of writing poetry. Often topics, titles, words and ideas for extending a poem's focus or meaning were offered to a friend. Sometimes a child would model an entire poem after a friend's piece. It seemed that peers played a critical role in helping each other extend beyond the obvious to think in more complex, divergent ways than might be possible when relying solely on one's own resources.

Clarifying Meanings. Peers frequently helped each other clarify the meanings of their written pieces. Sometimes the focus was on clarifying the use of one word which might not effectively convey an intended meaning. At other times the focus was on clarifying a line or the meaning of the whole poem. This mutual collaboration produced additional ideas and refinements which children might not have perceived on their own. The result was usually a more imaginative, meaningful piece.

Supporting the Struggle. Just as the teachers provided praise and honest criticism concerning children's tentative efforts with poetry, peers offered similar support. At the beginning of the year, these comments were invariably positive and relatively unfocused. When one child asked a friend

to "listen to this" or "does this sound right", the listener usually showed only minor interest, responding with "that's good" or "I like that." Occasionally, more negative comments like "that sounds more like a story than poetry" were offered.

As the children became more used to each other and more familiar with the critiquing process, the tenor of these comments changed. They became more focused, addressing specific aspects of a poem, while recognizing the writer's struggle in creating it. Thus, comments such as "I really liked that poem, you really showed me about spring" or "that's a good poem -- the words just roll around in my head" were heard. Critical comments were also focused, often specifying particular modifications. In this way initial understandings were refined and modified in an environment of mutual trust and support.

Understandings of Poetic Elements.

Through their extensive experiences with poetry, these children began building constructs about the meaning and use of various poetic elements. This development was not linear but rather transactional in nature. Awareness, which evolved initially through repeated encounters with professionally written models, influenced the children's subsequent experimentation with these elements. This experimentation, in turn, deepened awareness and appreciation for their skillful use by professionals.

Within this interdependent cycle of awareness and experimentation, children's responses evolved along a continuum ranging from no understanding of an element to a concrete, literal awareness to a rather abstract conceptual level. By May, few children could be classified as at

the "no awareness" level for any element. Yet all did not advance to the more complex levels. However, those children who did seem to have acquired more formal understanding had progressed through levels which were eventually exhibited by the others, lending further credence to a continuum model for analysis. Their understandings are described in the following section.

Poetry is Sense-making. By the year's end, most children viewed poetry as something which could be understood by making use of insights from teachers or peers. Few could construct interpretations of professional poetry on their own; sense-making was essentially a social activity. Children also frequently helped each other clarify and extend the meanings of their own pieces.

Poetry Must Reflect Reality. In their selection of topics, critiquing comments and subsequent revisions, most children seemed to realize that a poem must faithfully reflect the world as they knew it. Thus, they increasingly selected topics and refined meanings to reflect their perceptions of the world.

Selecting the Precise Word. The children began acquiring an increasingly refined understanding of how words can complement and extend a poem's meaning. Initially, their understandings were unfocused; any word which seemed to fit was used. However, most children moved to a level at which they selected words that were both unusual and appropriate to the poem's meaning. Some children were even able to "play with" various possible word choices.

Poetry Must Sound Poetic. Children at both grade levels developed increasingly complex understandings of how poetry's sound is conveyed through rhythm, rhyme and alliteration. Initial understandings were rather

unfocused and literal. However, many progressed to a level in which they could appreciate skillful integration of these elements with the poem's meaning. These understandings were then applied to their own pieces.

Poetry Must Look Poetic. The children gradually acquired a sense of how poetry looks. Most passed through an initial stage of unawareness to a conscious understanding of how shape affects and extends meaning. Some became skillful at manipulating multiple lines within one poem or manipulating whole verses.

Poetry is Unique. The children began noticing how poets go beyond the trite and obvious to make their poetry unique. They then attempted to "say something new or something old in a new way" in their own pieces. Initially, little attention was given to how the unusual word or image contributed to the poem's meaning. However, many were eventually able to introduce unique elements which contributed to the overall sense.

Show, Not Tell: Creating an Image. Children gradually developed an awareness of how poets subtly evoke a mood or communicate a feeling. However, they were not always skillful at applying this knowledge to their own pieces.

Poetic Form. The children began developing an awareness and appreciation for various kinds of poetry. They became skilled at identifying different forms and many attempted to make their own poems conform to the characteristics of acrostics, limericks, haiku and nonsense.

Figurative Language. As space does not permit a full explication of each element, only understandings of figurative language will be described in some detail. In a manner similar to that observed in conjunction with other poetic elements, the children gradually developed understandings of various kinds of figurative language, particularly simile, metaphor,

onomatopoeia and personification. Often children were unable to identify these elements by their formal names. Rather, they evolved a tacit understanding of what these elements were and how poets use them to develop and extend their intended meanings.

Most children began at a stage of concrete, literal awareness in which they realized the poet was comparing. Yet they had little understanding of the purpose of this comparison or how it related to a more abstract, complex meaning. Some remained at this level the entire year, always viewing a comparison from this literal perspective. Thus, for example, when the sixth grade teacher read aloud Thurman's "Breaking Through" (a poem comparing a plant breaking through the ground to morning breaking through night and spring breaking through winter), Matt could not see the poem as anything more than "a seed coming out of its shell." Similarly, when the fifth grade teacher organized a small group of her students to discuss "Warning," a poem about a middle-aged woman longing to be as spontaneous as a child, Tiffany insisted the speaker was a child. She maintained this stance even when others showed her lines which indicated the woman was addressing her children.

Some children moved beyond this level to a more complex awareness of the "deeper meaning" inherent in metaphorical language. This development was not confined to sixth graders; fifth graders who read a great deal of poetry and regularly experimented with the use of figurative language in their own writing also could express these more abstract understandings. Thus, during the previously mentioned discussion with "Breaking Through", Becky disagreed with Matt, stating:

> I had a different view of that, I was kind of thinking it was comparing spring and the day to a seed breaking through the ground...You know how

> everything has to fight through to get out...when they're first beginning...all three verses have this alike.

In the discussion of "Warning" Earnie, in contrast to Tiffany, understood the allusion to an adult "thinking about the future and how she wanted to change."

The children demonstrated similar patterns of understanding in their own use of metaphor. This awareness was initially implemented quite literally. Comparisons would be created with little attention given to the uniqueness of the image or how the rest of the poem functioned in relation to the metaphor. The following are poems which illustrate this level of understanding:

Rain

Rain is like thunder
That can't stop itself
Then it stops to rest.

Dolly
Grade 5

Windmill

As the windmill
Spins and spins
It cuts the wind
Just like cutting a pie.

Jimmy R.
Grade 6

Winter

Winter snow falls in my
mitten, like rain on
A cloudy day falling in
A puddle.

Deon
Grade 6

Many children, however, went beyond the literal level to a more abstract understanding of how a poet can manipulate various elements so as to maintain the use of figurative language throughout the poem as well as select just the right words and phrases to precisely convey the intended image. The following are a few examples (created after many drafts) of this more advanced use of figurative language:

Midnight Express

Fast as a speeding bullet
Whistling through a moonlit night
Silver lightning strikes ahead,
Searching for its journey's end.

Jeremy
Grade 5

Pencil Sharpener

A sharp jawed monster
Awaits a long-leaded meal.
With its mouth of metal,
It chews and spits
splinters of wood,
Makes its point,
Then satisfied, it rests.

Earnie
Grade 5

Balance Scales

Twin brothers sit side by side
One no higher than the other
Until one is filled with hate
And sinks lower than the
better brother.

Earnie
Grade 5

Nature's Gallery

Carved wooden puddles
Crystal canvas springs
Splatter painted brooks.
Make Nature's children
believe
They too can become pieces
of art

Jennifer R.
Grade 6

Autumn Masterpiece

The wind brushes
Warm colors
On a turquoise sky.
Capturing a fall day.

Johnny
Grade 6

Breakfast

The sun preys
Upon the night
As it tiptoes to the
horizon,
Big yellow bite, by big,
yellow bite
The sun swallows the
night.

Angela
Grade 6

Those who used more advanced metaphors in their pieces were usually assisted in their efforts by both teachers and peers. It was generally through comments offered in large and small group critiquing sessions that the children were able to refine and extend their metaphorical constructions.

ANGELA'S "SUNRISE"

In order to provide a fuller account of how context interacted with the children's developing responses to various poetic elements, a typical poetry cycle will be presented. The example was selected because it

incorporated a wide variety of contextual and response elements. The evolution of many poems was not always as complex nor did the events always occur over such an extended period of time. However, the basic components in this cycle occurred at some point in most other cycles, making the example a valid synthesis of what frequently transpired.

Angela got the original idea for her poem from an ordinary event in her life: an early Saturday trip to Columbus in October. As the sun rose that morning, Angela became intrigued by the interplay of shadow and color. She jotted down her initial impressions and later that day created the following rough draft:

Sunrise (Rough Draft)
The sun is slow rising
Over the horizon.
A bird chirps its song
While the other birds join in.
As the sun rises higher,
The world wakes
To sun rays in
their windows.

Angela initially asked her mother and sister for reactions. Both agreed the line "While the other birds join in" just didn't quite fit. Angela decided to eliminate it, later stating that "it didn't sound poetic." Her teacher indicated that the poem "had possibilities" so Angela decided to work on it further.

The poem was next submitted to several friends for help. Their comments focused mainly on refining the words. Thus, after looking through the thesaurus, they suggested that Angela change "slowly" to "gradually," "higher" to "greater" and "rises" to "grows." These selections "made the meaning better," in their opinion.

The poem was then taken to a teacher-led critiquing group. It was at this point that a major reconceptualization occurred. The group first

talked extensively about the phenomena Angela was trying to describe; what really happens, what the sun looks like at that time of day and other issues to ensure that she "remained true to her subject." They also decided to compare the sun to an animal stalking its prey. Several children commented that "gradually" was too ordinary a word. Using the thesaurus, they generated many words, including "explodes," "pops up," "sneaks," "peeks," "strikes" and "creeps," finally deciding that "sneaks" upon the night was the best word to convey the metaphorical image of the sun eating night as analogous to an animal eating its prey. One child, casually passing by the table, commented, "Well, if you're making it sound like an animal, why not use "preys". The group enthusiastically concurred with his choice. They also played with various ways to line the poem. The poem now looked as follows:

Sunrise (Rev. 3)
The sun preys
Upon the night
As it steps across the horizon
The sun grows greater
At the crack of day.

Angela once again returned to an informal peer-critiquing group. However, this time she received much less assistance. Rather, she was observed muttering aloud, "I don't like steps, I like peeks over the horizon better" and "crack is like what you do with an egg...that don't sound right." Shelli, a sixth grader, was the only one to provide substantive help, suggesting Angela substitute "tiptoes" for "peeks." After experimenting with more words and lining patterns, Angela's poem now looked as follows:

Sunrise (Rev. 4)
The sun preys
Upon the night
peeps
As it steps across the horizon
tiptoes
The sun grows greater
At the crack of day.

Angela then decided she needed more help with constructing an ending for her piece. She thus initiated a blackboard critiquing session with Angie and Becky in late December. The girls first suggested that Angela describe the sun's colors. They brainstormed "pink," "yellow," "red" and "blue," deciding that "yellow" was the most realistic color. They next experimented with several words, substituting "peeks around" for "preys" (later rejected because it broke the rhythm) and adding "swallows" to describe what the sun does to the night.

The sixth-grade teacher then asked several focused questions to help extend the metaphor. She pretended to eat, asking the girls to describe her actions. They responded with "biting," then Angela asked thoughtfully, "big biting, big biting." "Does that fit with your metaphor?" asked the teacher. Next, the teacher questioned them about the title which they had changed from "Sunrise" to "Devouring Sun." Again, she asked them to think of a new title which aptly crystalized the metaphor. The poem finally evolved into the following:

Breakfast
The sun preys
Upon the night
As it tiptoes to the horizon.
Big, yellow bite; by big, yellow bite,
The sun swallows the night.

Britton (1982) states that "the poet draws on his own experience in order to create fresh experience." Angela has done this. She has taken a simple everyday experience and created a unique image that is fresh and

imaginative. This was not accomplished independently. Rather, she was supported by an environment in which her tentative ideas were nurtured and valued.

CONCLUSION

The variety and depth of children's responses to poetry in this classroom provide a striking contrast to those reported by previous research. These children not only manifested a wide range of responses but their understandings were in many cases at a level of complexity more typical of older students. A supportive context was critical in effecting these changes. Repeated opportunities to discuss and savor poetry, then experiment with one's ideas in an atmosphere of mutual trust seemed to engender the willingness to attempt increasingly abstract responses.

The findings have several important implications for the teaching of poetry. First, children need to be immersed in reading and writing poetry. A short unit does not allow for the evolution of carefully considered ideas which necessarily evolve over time. Second, the major emphasis in such a program should not be the development of technical perfection but rather a mutual search for meaning which allows children to use their past understandings and experiences with literature. Third, because children often demonstrate their understandings in disorganized, inarticulate ways, their initial efforts must be nurtured by both teachers and peers. In this way children will develop an increasing sense and appreciation for poetic form.

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